

About 920 words,
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LUNCH BY THE STREAM

This is where food tastes best.

Curt Collins is a natural for next summer's Montana movie. Between beard and straw hat, his skin is oil-tanned leather, and he looks as if he could row against the current because that's what he does, 180 days a year. On his chest, furthermore, hangs a "guide's necklace" loaded with problem-solving equipment -- 1990s equivalent of a .45 caliber shell-belt. I spotted an emergency capsule of flies, spools of leader material, flotants for both regular dry flies and those with duck-butt feathers, containers of split shot and lead sleeves, a leader-clipper, and two medical forceps, which are used to remove hooks from trout. Curt mentioned that the forceps were also his "best cooking tools" for streamside lunches. I nodded as if I knew what he was talking about.

Curt spends the fishing season in Fort Smith -- a boom town built by a single natural resource, like so many others in the high west. In this case, however, the resource is aquatic insects, which nourish big, wild trout, which in turn attract fly-fishers from all over the world. The Bighorn is a destination river.

It is not an easy river to read, however. The vast solar energy in the Bighorn's depths is hidden by a big, calm surface, which makes the stream a good match for Curt Collins. When the tailwater fishery became legal in 1981, he was the first in line for an outfitter's license.

Our days on the stream started early, with hordes of little Tricos -- mayflies of the genus Tricorythodes -- falling spent on the water. At dusk there was a caddisfly hatch, also heavy. In between, I fished exactly where Curt told me with a pair of his soft-hackle sow bugs. The Bighorn's bragging trout are mostly rainbows, he said, and his boat's best for the year was an eleven-pounder. I'd have bragged about my 21-inch brown.

Our double shifts on the river were separated by a meal that Curt called lunch, though it looked more like Sunday dinner. When the trout stopped feeding, we started.

First thing out of our boat was a folding table with red-checked tablecloth and stools. Then came two propane barbecue grills and tableware, which included wine glasses. From a cooler the size of a life-raft, Curt produced a bottle of cold white wine, two cheeses, a summer sausage, strawberries, green grapes, chunks of melon, loaves of bread, a whole pie -- and the main course.

Every real cook likes to see his food appreciated, so I did the appreciating while Curt did the work. On one of the grills, he piled baked potatoes and ears of sweet corn, each pre-cooked, buttered, and wrapped in aluminum foil. He closed the lid of that

grill. On the other, he melted a smidgen of margarine, or perhaps two smidgens, in a foil tray. When the fat was bubbling, several handfuls of big shrimp went in the tray, then filets of orange roughly, and finally a few shakes of lemon pepper, garlic pepper, and garlic powder. He manipulated the hot foil with his quick-draw forceps.

The fish and shrimp were not overcooked. The potatoes were not undercooked. The pan-sauce was just right. This is the truth, uninfluenced by September sunshine, the rustle of cottonwood trees, and the smell of buffaloberries ripening in the sun. After lunch I picked a gallon of the berries before Curt reported that trout were moving into the riffles.

Here and there in my travels, there have been a few other cooks who could put such meals together. None of them did it on portable grills, in between pulling oars and rigging lead sleeves for sow bugs.

That evening, while watching Curt Collins prepare the next day's lunch, I deduced that the man runs on solar power, like his river. He recharges himself every day and the energy keeps him going far into the night.

"You have to start with good raw materials," Curt said. He boiled home-grown corn on the cob for seven minutes, then let it sit in the water for a few more. He baked potatoes in the microwave oven, sliced them, layered them with uncooked sliced onions, and sprinkled with seasoning salt and garlic powder. He simmered Cornish hens and stuffed them. Each dish was wrapped

separately in buttered foil. While he was preparing the acorn squash with buffaloberry jam, I dozed off and missed seeing him get the trimmings ready, but all of them emerged from his cooler the next afternoon.

Fishing and cooking are both ways of living with nature, when you think about it, and one works up an appetite for the other. You are a predator, Mr. or Ms. Fly-fisher. Might as well behave like one. Even trout pause for digestion when they have caught enough of their prey.

[My problem, up to now, has been lack of organization, not to mention run-down batteries. I thought of the streamside as a place for a sandwich, a drink of water, and a recharge on the cottonwood leaves. This habit is negotiable, now that Curt Collins has shown the way.

Wonder if my wife would help with the midnight preparations if I promised her a lunch by the stream?)

(Sidebar)

You can leave a message for Curt Collins any time at (406) 656-5563. In the summer, you can also write him at P.O. Box 475, Fort Smith, MT 59035. You might even be able to reach his streamside quarters by calling (406) 666-2284 -- after 9.p.m.